

TYPHUS (ENDEMIC TYPHUS)

What is typhus?

Typhus is caused by small bacteria called Rickettsia. In the United States (U.S.), typhus occurs mostly in the Southeastern and Gulf States, and in Southern California. Typhus is also found in remote areas of North, Central, and Southern Africa, middle and western areas of Asia, and Mexico.

Today, fewer than 80 cases are reported annually in the U.S. Most of these cases occur in Texas and California. California cases tend to occur in suburban foothill settings in Southern California from exposure to certain animals and their fleas (see below).

How do you get typhus?

Fleas carry the bacteria and shed it in their feces. When a flea bites a person and begins to suck blood it often will also defecate near the bite site. A person who scratches the flea bite can scratch some of the infectious feces into the bite wound. The bacteria can also enter through contamination of the eye, nose, or mouth. Rarely, the disease may also be acquired by inhalation of dried infective flea feces.

How does this disease maintain itself?

Most commonly, the bacteria lives in rats, mice, and other small mammals and their associated fleas. In Southern California and Texas, fleas from cats and opossums have been carriers of the disease.

What are the symptoms of this disease, and how do you treat it?

Most infected persons experience fever, headache, backache, and joint pain 6 to 14 days after contact with an infected flea. A common sign is a rash that begins on the chest and spreads to the sides and back. The rash may last only a few hours. Extremely high fever (106°F) may last up to two weeks. Very few people who get typhus die, but people over 50 years of age can get severely ill. Fortunately, antibiotics can effectively treat typhus.

Where can I get more information on typhus?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has information available at their website <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/diseases/typhus.htm>.